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VOC FOR IOP/FII

NEWS ANALYSIS NO. 1-0096
CHARLES MEDD

FEBRUARY 3, 1976

1976 ELECTIONS AND THE APATHY FACTOR

AUTHOR:

POLITICAL ANALYSTS HAVE BEEN SAYING FOR SOME TIME THAT MUCH OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC IS LOSING CONFIDENCE IN THE GOVERNMENT'S ABILITY TO DEAL WITH MODERN PROBLEMS. AND WITH ANOTHER PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION NOW UNDER WAY, MANY OF THE EXPERTS ARE SAYING THERE IS A CORRESPONDING LOSS OF CONFIDENCE IN WHAT THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS CAN DO TO CHANGE THINGS. CHARLES MEDD HAS THESE COMMENTS.

VOICE:

WHEN MISSISSIPPI DEMOCRATS MET FOR THEIR STATE-WIDE PARTY CAUCUS LAST MONTH, A REPORTER ASKED TWENTY VOTERS, SELECTED AT RANDOM, IF THEY KNEW WHO LLOYD BENTSEN WAS, AND ONLY TWO SAID YES. ONE OF THEM CORRECTLY IDENTIFIED HIM AS A UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM TEXAS WHO IS RUNNING FOR THE PRESIDENCY. THE OTHER THOUGHT HISTER BENTSEN PLAYED FOOTBALL FOR A PROFESSIONAL TEAM CALLED THE NEW ORLEANS SAINTS.

AT THIS STAGE OF A NATIONAL ELECTION, IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT ONLY A FEW VOTERS CAN NAME ALL THE CANDIDATES AND THAT OF THOSE WHO CAN EVEN LESS HAVE CHOSEN A FAVORITE. IN MOST SURVEYS THE MOST POPULAR ANSWER IS "I DON'T KNOW." TROUBLING AS THAT ANSWER MAY BE TO THE POLITICIANS, EVEN MORE TROUBLING IS THE IMPLICATION, DRAWN FROM OTHER SURVEYS, THAT MANY VOTERS DON'T CARE EITHER.

IN RECENT DAYS, BOTH THE NEW YORK TIMES AND THE WALL STREET JOURNAL HAVE CARRIED REPORTS INDICATING THAT THE AMERICAN PUBLIC IS FAR LESS ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT THIS YEAR'S CAMPAIGN THAN THE AMERICAN PRESS. ACCORDING TO POLITICAL ANALYSTS, THERE ARE SEVERAL EXPLANATIONS, BEGINNING WITH THE WIDE-SPREAD BELIEF THAT THE GOVERNMENT CAN NO LONGER DEAL WITH NATIONAL PROBLEMS AND THAT IT MAKES LITTLE DIFFERENCE WHO RUNS THE GOVERNMENT.

THIS WAVE OF PESSIMISM -- THE EXPERTS SAY -- IS A DIRECT OUTGROWTH OF VIETNAM AND WATERGATE, EVENTS THAT TARNISHED FIRST THE DEMOCRATS AND THEN THE REPUBLICANS. NOT SURPRISINGLY, MORE AMERICANS THAN EVER -- ABOUT TWO IN EVERY FIVE -- CALL THEMSELVES INDEPENDENTS.

SOME HISTORIANS POINT OUT THAT THERE HAVE BEEN MAJOR PARTY REALIGNMENTS IN THIS COUNTRY ABOUT EVERY FORTY YEARS AND THAT THE TIME HAS COME FOR ANOTHER SUCH SHIFT. UNTIL THE PARTIES COMPLETE THEIR RESHUFFLING, MANY VOTERS WILL REMAIN IN LIMBO AND IMMUNE TO PARTY PRESSURES.

ALTHOUGH MORE AMERICANS THAN EVER ARE VOTING -- NEW ELIGIBILITY AND ENFORCEMENT LAWS HAVE SEEN TO THAT -- THE PERCENTAGE OF THOSE CASTING BALLOTS IN NATIONAL ELECTIONS HAS BEEN DECLINING STEADILY SINCE 1960. WHETHER THIS TREND CONTINUES WILL DEPEND ON STILL UNCERTAIN FACTORS -- THE CHOICE OF CANDIDATES FOR THE COMING ELECTION AND HOW WELL THEY CAN ARTICULATE THE ISSUES AND THE ANSWERS. FOR IF THE RECENT SURVEYS DESCRIBE A STATE OF VOTER APATHY, THEY ALSO POINT TO A YEARNING FOR LEADERSHIP AND A CONVICTION THAT THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS -- HOWEVER FLAWED -- IS THE BEST WAY TO FIND IT.

GH/RCS